COMMENTARY

TRUMP'S 'YEAR ZERO' IS OVER. NOW COMES THE RECKONING

The president's terrifying revolution came to Washington in 2025. It will ultimately be the year the revolution was lost

By MATT BAI

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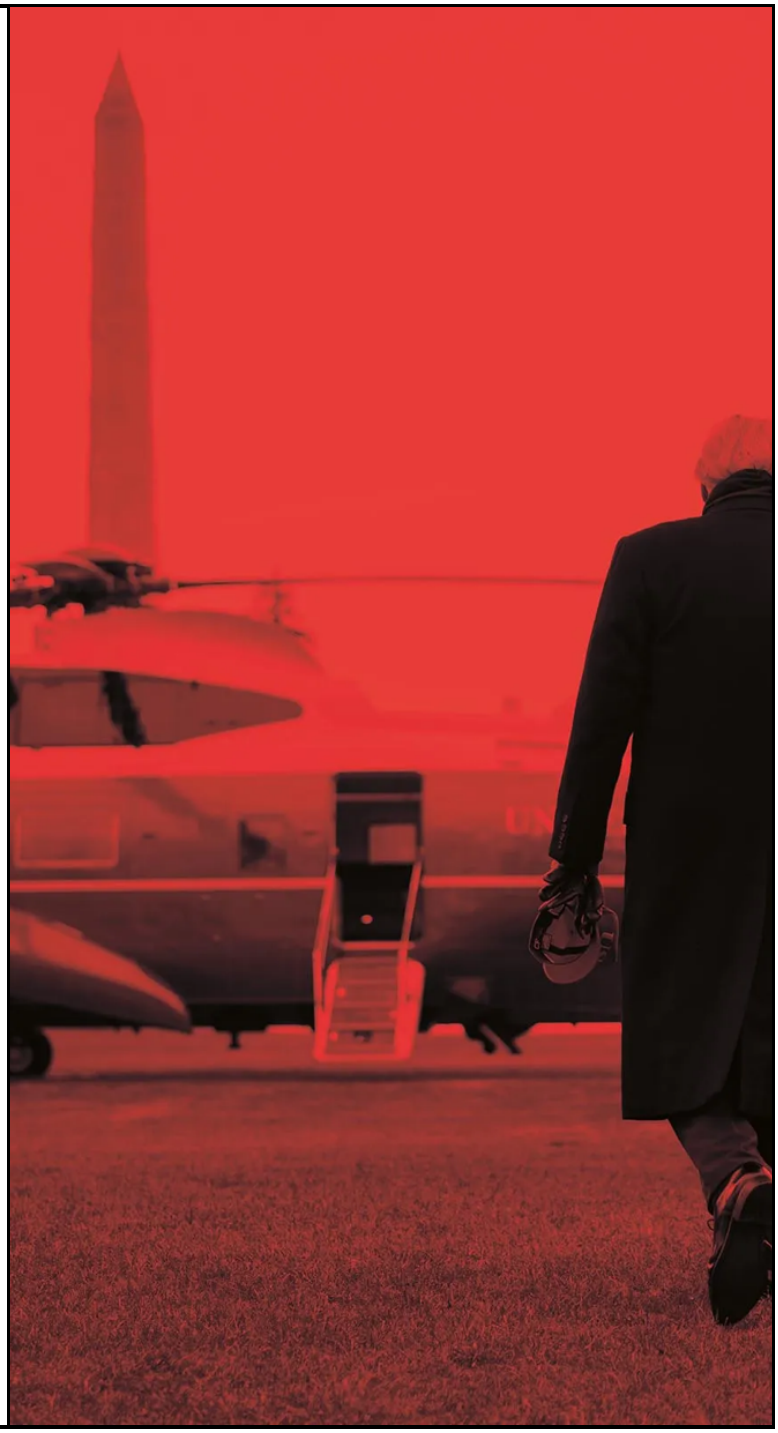

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Sometime early in **Donald Trump**'s second term — after he'd emptied the prisons of rioters and commenced a terror campaign against federal workers, but well before he demolished the East Wing — a distant memory resurfaced in my mind.

It was 1992, and I was a young reporter writing from a divided Liberia, traveling the abandoned road from the dusty town of Gbanga, where Charles Taylor and his rebel army ruled, to the capital of Monrovia. On the outskirts of the city, I passed the ruins of a water-treatment plant that Taylor's teenage rebels had gleefully shot to pieces.

These rural revolutionaries had never seen water or electric plants and had no idea how they worked. What they knew was that anything erected by the governing elite had to be leveled before Liberia could finally be returned — as Taylor put it, staring right at me and surrounded by gunmen, just before I fled Gbanga in a hurry — to the "law of the jungle."

I keep returning to that image, because for me it gets to the heart of what 2025 brought to Washington. It will be remembered as the year Trump's terrifying revolution came to town — and, ultimately, the year it was lost.

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During his first term, Trump delegated governance to a succession of milquetoast-y aides who saw themselves as human guardrails, their job to keep him mostly inside the white lines of conservative thought. This second term, on the other hand, is an adventure in off-roading. Clearly growing fatigued and more erratic as he closes in on 80, Trump relies now on a cadre of like-minded advisers — Stephen Miller, Russell Vought, Vice President J.D. Vance — who unapologetically embrace authoritarianism and white-nationalist identity, whether they call it that or not.

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Trump's anti-intellectuals aren't interested in old conservative chestnuts like returning power to the states or expanding global markets. What they're after is nothing less than a radical reordering of society (and, increasingly, the international order), starting with the humiliation of the educated elite and the delegitimization of all social progress from the last half of the 20th century. At its core, Trump's movement is a war on modernity.

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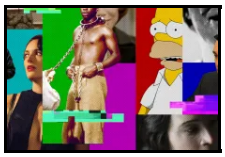

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This is something new to America, but not so much to the rest of the world. So maybe the best way to understand the movement isn't by comparing Trump to tyrants or previous presidents, but rather to some of the last century's most notorious anti-intellectual uprisings: the Maoists in China, the Cambodian Khmer Rouge, Taylor's teenage

rebellion.

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Sure, this is hyperbole, in a literal sense. Whatever else Trump may be, he's certainly not a mass murderer, and even our crescendoing political violence, the worst since the 1960s, is trifling compared to what those countries endured.

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In purely ideological terms, though, MAGA is basically the more-refined cousin of these cruder, more-violent insurgencies. Does anyone really think Trump wants to snuff out electric cars because he cares so much about oil? If that were true, he wouldn't have turned the White House driveway into a Tesla showroom for a day. No, the nation's energy policy now is entirely driven by tribalism and revenge. Trump wiping out billions of dollars in wind projects with a stroke of his pen is no different from Taylor's soldiers shooting up the water plants — a satisfying "fuck you" to the intelligentsia, even if it sets the country back for years.

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Uprisings of ignorance always share certain characteristics: a campaign of retribution against the educated classes, ethnic retrenching and the scapegoating of otherness, the official rewriting of

established history. (Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge famously declared the onset of their brutal reign as "Year Zero" in Cambodia, aspiring to bury modern history altogether.) Inevitably, there comes the moment when national identity is supplanted by a single cult figure.

Trump couldn't check these boxes any better if it were one of those memory tests he keeps claiming to have aced. Prosecute a chilling campaign against universities, law firms, media, and judges. *Check.* Seize control of the national arts, and sanitize official histories. *Check.* Denigrate immigrants as "garbage," and declare that America belongs principally to white Christians. *Check.*

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And then there's the Trump coins and Trump bonds, the Trump Kennedy Center and the Donald J. Trump Institute of Peace, the celebration of Trump's birthday (rather than Martin Luther King Jr.'s) with free admission to national parks, the giant banners of a scowling Trump hanging on cabinet buildings (remarkably similar to the banners of Saddam Hussein I once saw in Ba'athist Iraq). *Check, check,* and *check.*

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The legendary Hunter S. Thompson, covering the 1972 campaign for this magazine, once said of Richard Nixon that he represented "that dark, venal, and incurably violent side of the American character that every other country in the world has learned to fear and despise." If so, then Trump's movement represents something else: that resentful, rage-fueled side of humanity that most countries now recognize to be the enemy of enlightenment.

But here's the good news: America is not some underdeveloped country trying to shake off centuries of colonialism. And despite what some alarmists would have you believe, our swaying institutions have not yet collapsed. Here, people still get to vote (for the most part, anyway), which is why Trump's radical revolution has almost certainly crested. Year Zero in Washington brought exactly the kind of retribution Trump promised. Year One looks like another story.

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IT USED TO BE A JOKE, the way Trump predicted winning and more winning to the point where we would all get sick of winning. For most of the past year, though, it seemed as if he were actually making good on the promise.

"TRUMP'S RETURN TO

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Trump was winning in Congress, with the Supreme Court, with the law firms and media conglomerates who paid him what amounted to outright bribes. It was, in fact, sickening, and every Democrat I talked to seemed to have the same mystified complaint. Where was the outrage? How could so many Americans have voted for this?

The answer is complicated. They did, but they also didn't.

Trump, you may recall, was politically toxic as recently as 2022. Had he not been facing both prison and penury as a private citizen, I'm not sure he would have even tried to mount a third presidential campaign.

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What resurrected him, more than anything else, was that Democrats insisted on mounting a ferocious cultural revolution of their own. Having won the presidency on a promise of returning to some kind of normalcy, Joe Biden stood by as leftist activists and academics set about smashing the pillars of 20th-century liberalism — deriding free speech as a tool of oppressors, obsessing on personalized pronouns and silly language edicts, going on about defunding police, carving the country into a series of identity-based grievances.

It's not that most white voters couldn't acknowledge problems of racial injustice or trans rights or out-of-control policing. It's more that they didn't want to be blamed for those problems, and they recoiled at radical solutions. Voters were worried about the soaring cost of living, and Democrats always seemed worried about somebody else.

These were the twin tenets of Trump's appeal for a lot of white independents, in particular — that he was the only guy standing between them and the truth-and-reconciliation regime, and that he would actually focus on things that affected the working people of America. All the nuttiness about election-denying and retribution just seemed like Trump being Trump, the price you had to pay for getting the country back to business.

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Except what did Trump and his party do after they won? They turned around and made the exact same mistake, misreading the meaning of a modest victory, embarking on an anti-intellectual purge instead of actually reforming anything. In some ways, Trump's cultural uprising is the dark, bizarro-world image of what preceded him. His version of thought-policing takes aim at foreign-born citizens and vaccine scientists. His notion of identity-based grievance is about the persecution of white America.

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The uprising may be effective, but it's never been popular. According to Gallup, Trump's approval rating was at 47 percent when he took office in January — decidedly underwhelming for a newly elected president. From there, the trend line looks like a beginner's ski slope. In December, Trump bottomed out at about 36 percent approval, which, given Trump's unshakable support among 25 or 30 percent of

the electorate, is probably about as low as it can get.

"FOR ALL THE POLARIZATION, WE REMAIN A MORE PRAGMATIC COUNTRY THAN OUR PARTIES OR MEDIA BELIEVE."

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When voters finally had the chance to weigh in on Trump's first year, during November's off-year elections, the results were stunning and unambiguous. Republicans didn't just lose the governors' races in New Jersey and Virginia, they lost down-ballot races in Mississippi and Georgia, too. Nothing suggests a turnaround is imminent. It's not like Trump's getting *more* popular as his imperialist foreign policy starts to resemble an adolescent game of Risk. ("You take Greenland; I'll attack Kamchatka.") It's not like he's going to fall asleep any *less* in public as the months grind on.

If Republicans get hammered in the midterm elections, then Trump can go on issuing fiats and bullying prosecutors, but his radical program will already have failed. Any musings about an illegal third term will be the stuff of satire. The banners will quietly come down. The conversation that will begin immediately after November — about the next election — will leave Trump where he least likes to be: on the periphery.

Granted, there's no guarantee of that; at this time four years ago, Biden was barely more popular than Trump, and his party managed to outperform expectations in the midterms. That we find ourselves in a similar electoral climate, though, with the governing party's soaring social agenda tumbling smack into economic reality on the ground, ought to tell us something.

For the past decade, at least, we've been caught up in a cycle of dueling cultural agendas, buffeted by identity-based ideas for remaking the social order. And here's what we know: Americans are flat-out exhausted from it. For all that polarization everyone in my business loves to talk about, for all the viral tweets and virtue signaling, we remain a more pragmatic country than our parties or our media seem to believe.

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America will spend this coming year celebrating our own radical and violent remaking of society, 250 years ago. What the voters keep trying to tell us is that there isn't much market for a sequel.

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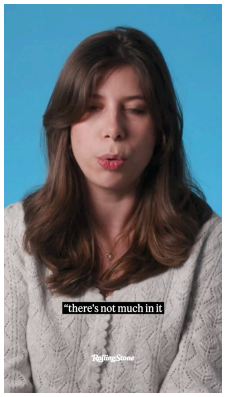

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